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ABSTRACT

The vocabulary development curriculum offered by developmental reading programs in Georgia postsecondary institutions was studied. A total of 49 reading specialists from 39 institutions completed a questionnaire that covered: emphasis placed on vocabulary development, practices followed in expanding students' vocabularies, and the materials used for instruction. Practices of the following types of institutions were compared: community colleges, four-year colleges, universities, and vocational/technical schools. The following issues were identified for further consideration: no single vocabulary text was endorsed by a majority of respondents; respondents did not always assess vocabulary knowledge with the proper instruments; review of teacher-made instruments is needed; and specialists appear to favor a skills-based approach to vocabulary instruction. Specific texts and assessment instruments used by the schools are identified. Appendices provide information on: regular testing activities undertaken at the schools; diagnostic testing practices; specific tests used for assessing vocabulary instruction; formats for test items; instructional methods; instructional elements (i.e., words in context, pronunciation skills); and instructor-designed activities. A study questionnaire is included. (SW)

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College Reading and Learning Assistance
Technical Report 84-06

Vocabulary Instruction in Georgia's Postsecondary Reading Programs

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Georgia State University

May 1984

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Georgia State University

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HE 017623

The following report is to appear in the Georgia Journal of Reading. The appendix to this report contains the questionnaire which was mailed to institutions of higher education throughout Georgia.

Vocabulary Instruction

in Georgia's Postsecondary Reading Programs

While researchers interested in vocabulary knowledge tend to be influenced by various theoretical perspectives, for example, the instrumental hypothesis, the aptitude hypothesis, or the knowledge hypothesis (Anderson & Freebody, 1979), there is little argument that vocabulary knowledge is a correlate of linguistic competence.

A consistent research finding over the years has been that word knowledge is related to reading comprehension (Botzum, 1951; Clark, 1972; Davis, 1944, 1968; Fruchter, 1948; Wrigley, Saunders, & Newhaus, 1958). More recently researchers have observed the interrelationships between both discipline-specific vocabulary and advanced general vocabulary with content mastery in college courses (Sartain, 1981; Sartain, Stahl, Ami, Bohn, Holly, Smolenski, & Stein, 1982). Such a relationship between reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge underscores the need for a viable vocabulary development component in post-secondary reading courses.

Since postsecondary institutions in Georgia (n=97) offer developmental or remedial reading courses, the researchers wished to determine the breadth and depth of the vocabulary development curriculum offered by these developmental reading programs. Questionnaires covering aspects of vocabulary instruction were sent to the directors of developmental reading programs at each of the identified postsecondary institutions across the state.

The questionnaire covered three broad categories of vocabulary instruction: (1) the emphasis placed on vocabulary development, (2) the practices followed in expanding students' vocabularies, and (3) the materials used for instruction.

A total of 49 postsecondary reading specialists from 39 institutions returned completed questionnaires. These questionnaires were grouped in four general categories by institution: (1) community colleges (i.e., community colleges, junior colleges, nursing schools), (2) comprehensive colleges, (i.e., liberal arts colleges, technical colleges, bible colleges, agricultural colleges), (3) universities, and (4) vocational-technical schools. The purpose of this article is to share the findings of this survey with postsecondary reading specialists.

Results of the Survey

Published Vocabulary Development Materials

One of the primary goals of the survey was to determine which published materials were used regularly by postsecondary reading programs in Georgia. A review of Subject Guide to Books in Print (1983) shows that college reading specialists may choose from over 40 vocabulary texts, workbooks, and tradebooks appropriate for postsecondary reading instruction. Furthermore, Bahe (1970) found that vocabulary development activities have been included regularly in college reading texts. Instructors, in addition, may utilize specialized skill-sequence kits, audio-visual instructional systems, computer software, and self-designed materials.

One of the initial questions on the survey asked the respondents to specify which materials they assigned or used during the 1982-1983 academic year. The responses show that community college instructors tend to assign either vocabulary workbooks or reading and study-skills texts for developing students' vocabulary levels. Instructors from four year colleges and technical colleges assign a full range of texts, skills kits, and audio-visual materials. University instructors assign vocabulary texts and also employ content field materials developed by their respective programs. The respondents from the vocational/technical schools favor skills kits and audio-visual systems, but they also use vocabulary workbooks and program-designed systems to a lesser degree.

The responses to this open-ended item indicate that no particular text is an overwhelming favorite across all of the institutional categories; however, seven of the community college respondents, 47% of the pool, assign Gaining Word Power (Rubin, reference note 1). Other texts with multiple responses include Keys to a Powerful Vocabulary (Maker and Lanier, 1982), 5 responses; Today's Language (Hiers, Williams and Jacobs, 1981), 4 responses; and 1100 Words You Need to Know (Bromberg and Gordon, 1971) 4 responses. Seventeen other responses were spread across nearly as many texts or workbooks. Traditional reading and study-skills texts which contain vocabulary components (e.g., Bridging the Gap, Smith, 1981; Opportunities for Skillful Reading, Joffe, 1980) were noted by 13 respondents. Skill sequence kits (e.g., the Multiple Skills Series, Boning, 1978)

were mentioned by 15 specialists, a majority of whom are teaching in vocational/technical schools. In fact, 62% of the specialists from the 13 vocational/technical institutions utilize skill-building kits.

The responses to open-ended items requesting specialists to state their primary reasons for selecting vocabulary texts were grouped into eight general categories. While a majority of the respondents did not specify a particular reason for choosing a text, 29% indicated that the specific set of words covered in a text influenced the decision for adopting a text. Additional factors influencing instructors' selection of text include: (1) ease of use for self-paced instruction or for small group instruction--27%, (2) breadth of instructional approaches--22%, (3) emphasis on context clues--16%, (4) extent of practice activities--14%, (5) interest level of text or activities--6%, (6) convenience of text--6%, and (7) emphasis on word elements--5%. Several respondents, particularly those from community colleges and vocational-technical schools, noted that they do not receive regularly examination copies of texts and hence have a limited pool of materials from which they choose new class materials.

Assessment Instruments Used in Classes

The vocabulary section of a standardized survey level reading test is used regularly by 73% of the respondents. Given the findings of other studies (Gordon, 1983; Boueche and Snow, 1977), it was not surprising to discover that the Nelson-Denny

Reading Test (Brown, 1973) is the preferred instrument; 39% of the respondents preferred this instrument. Specialists using the Nelson-Denny are employed primarily at comprehensive colleges (n=12), but a number (n=7) are from community colleges. The other survey test which were mentioned include the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (1975), the McGraw-Hill Basic Skills System, (Raygor, 1970), the Iowa Silent Reading Test (Farr, 1973), and the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test (Karlsen, Madden, & Gardner, 1976). Nearly of half the respondents (n=6) from the vocational-technical schools use the Test of Adult Basic Education (1976), and one respondent listed the Wide Range Achievement Test (Jastak & Jastak, 1978). Of particular interest is the fact that 42% of the respondents employing a survey level test use the instrument for diagnostic purroses.

Only 12% of the respondents use a standardized vocabulary test, and the only one mentioned by a respondent was the Basic Word Vocabulary Test (Dupuy, 1975). Other forms of assessment used regularly by the respondents include: (1) informal vocabulary tests included in a teacher's manual for a text--35%, (2) informal vocabulary tests developed by the respondent--43%, and (3) vocabulary tests developed by the respondent's department or institution--16%.

Table 1 presents the regular testing activities undertaken by the respondents from each institutional category. Diagnostic testing practices are also noted in this table.

Place Table 1 about here

Postsecondary reading specialists may use several assessment procedures in measuring their pupils' achievement of the specific instructional units presented in class. The researchers were particularly interested in determining when tests were given relative to instructional units (i.e., chapter tests, section tests, final tests, and pretest-posttest designs). Responses to the question were similar for the most part, since 52% use a pretest-posttest, 50% use section tests, 46% use chapter tests, and 46% employ final tests. Table 2 shows the percentages of respondents utilizing specific tests for assessing vocabulary instruction.

Place Table 2 about here

There are a number of formats for test items that postsecondary reading specialists can develop for inclusion in their teacher-made vocabulary tests. Respondents were directed to identify which of seven common item formats they included regularly on their respective instruments.

The multiple-choice item, not surprisingly, was found to be the most common test item since it is employed by 77% of the respondents. A majority of the respondents noted that they include (1) definition development items--65%, (2) fill-in items--58%, (3) sentence development items--54%, and (4) synonym

matching items--52%. Table 3 presents the percentage of respondents in each institutional category using each of the seven item formats. Nearly 45% of the respondents noted other item formats, such as definition matching, word element matching, short essay, puzzles, and context clue usage.

Place Table 3 about here

Instructional Methods

The elements of the vocabulary development curriculum can be taught to pupils with any of several instructional methods or combination of methods. Forty-eight of the respondents noted the various instructional practices they follow when teaching vocabulary skills. An individualized approach in which students work with either workbooks, skills series, worksheets, etc., throughout the quarter is employed most often. The only other approach endorsed by a majority of respondents is the traditional method of assigning a vocabulary chapter for homework, then reviewing and correcting the exercise in class. Table 4 lists the percentage of respondents in each institutional category using the eight different methods. It is interesting to note that a majority of the instructors in vocational/technical schools (69%) appear to rely on audio-visual materials in a lab setting for individualized instruction.

Place Table 4 about here

Instructional Elements

The respondents were asked to identify which of 14 elements of a possible vocabulary development curriculum they generally covered in their respective courses. These instructional elements are ordered according to the frequency with which they are taught: (1) words in context--90%, (2) word elements--86%, (3) dictionary/reference utilization--84%, (4) pronunciation skills--65%, (5) figurative language--63%, (6) etymology--57%, (7) word families--57%, (8) college content field--45%, (9) misused words--39%, (10) foreign words--35%, (11) jargon--31%, (12) descriptive words--31%, (13) words derived from proper nouns--29%, and (14) slang--24%. Table 5 demonstates that the five most favored instructional elements do not vary appreciably across institutional categories.

Place Table 5 about here

Instructor Designed Activities

Although vocabulary texts generally include practice activities in each chapter or unit to reinforce the meanings of new words, it is not unusual for instructors to employ various practice activities of their own design. The researchers wished to determine the nature of the activities utilized by the respondents. Several practice activities from the 14 noted on the questionnaire are used by a majority of the respondents. Ordered by frequency of use, the activities appear as follows:

(1) words in context--80%, (2) definitions--78%, (3) multiple-choice questions--73%, (4) sentence completion--65%, (5) matching--63%, (6) word elements--57%, (7) analogies--47%, (8) fill-ins--35%, (9) word element fill-ins--35%, (10) crossword puzzles--33%, (11) word searches--16%, (12) word scrambles--14%, (13) acrostics--10%, and (14) crisscross puzzles--4%. These results suggest a preference across institutional categories in favor of activities which mirror test items commonly found on objective teacher-made tests. To a lesser degree, respondents utilized more complex activities which are not as easy to correct. This preference is further borne out by Table 6 which ranks the preferred activities within each institutional category.

Place Table 6 about here

Discussion

Related to the findings of this survey are four issues which warrant further discussion.

1. No single vocabulary textbook was endorsed by a majority of the respondents. However, even when a text was preferred, there appeared to be no clear rationale for its selection. One reason may be that many respondents do not utilize text selection criteria. For instance, criteria could be based on what research has shown to be the successful methods and techniques for developing vocabulary knowledge, as opposed to reasons of

convenience or tradition. The fact that respondents did not describe a clear rationale for text selection may actually reflect a lack or ambiguity of goals for the vocabulary program. Without a clear idea of what vocabulary instruction is expected to accomplish, it is not surprising that texts are often chosen for vague or arbitrary reasons.

2. Respondents do not always assess vocabulary knowledge with the proper instruments. All too often, survey-level tests such as the Nelson-Denny Reading Test are used for diagnostic purposes. Few vocabulary tests appear to be targeted for the college reading population. Nevertheless, this dearth of testing material does not remove responsibility from instructors to use standardized instruments in the manner in which they were primarily designed. This problem points to the need for each college reading specialist to possess a basic knowledge of sound measurement practices. Future sessions at state reading conferences would prove to be valuable for sharing knowledge about testing issues. An outgrowth of these sessions might be the development of a diagnostic vocabulary instrument for college-level students.

3. Related to the aforementioned issues of standardized assessment are several additional concerns with the use of informal, teacher-made instruments in evaluating students' mastery of a vocabulary corpus. First, instructors should plan assessment activities that measure the students' growth in the receptive aspects of vocabulary knowledge required for college reading and listening tasks. In addition, assessment activities

should stress equally the students' ability to utilize accurately the same terms in the expressive or communicative function of speaking and writing. On the surface, at least, it appears that the respondents to this questionnaire do use a variety of test items that measure both aspects of vocabulary mastery. Yet, without a careful review of teacher-made instruments, it is impossible to determine the extent to which types of items are actually employed in measuring students' receptive and expressive mastery of a vocabulary corpus. Secondly, if knowledge of a particular corpus of words is a defined goal of a reading course, student mastery should be assessed not only for short-term recall through weekly tests or section tests but also for long-term recall with cummulative final tests. The results from the survey suggest that both of the above recommendations can be readily incorporated into existing programs.

4. Postsecondary reading specialists across the state appear to favor a skills-based approach to vocabulary instruction. Such instruction generally stresses the presentation of concepts at the word level with elaboration to the context of the sentence. Moreover, it appears that only a limited number of instructors place equal or greater emphasis on expanding word knowledge through a whole text, interactive reading mode. For example, even the teaching of clues for unlocking word meanings in context, a task particularly well suited to whole text activities, appears to be limited to examples at the sentence level. Given the current direction of vocabulary teaching, an additional dimension for instruction

would be to emphasize vocabulary expansion through the utilization of whole text materials such as trade books, current periodicals, and appropriate college texts.

Conclusion

The link between reading comprehension and word knowledge has so strong a research base as to suggest that it is pedagogically sound to teach vocabulary development in college reading courses. Based on responses to the questionnaire discussed here, students in Georgia's postsecondary reading courses are receiving vocabulary instruction through a variety of instructional methods and teaching techniques.

Since the survey was descriptive in nature, it provides little in the way of qualitative information about the effectiveness of the reported materials and methods. In the long run, it is the responsibility of the reading specialist and program coordinator to ensure the vocabulary development curriculum is pedagogically sound and meets program goals. While these goals may be narrowly focused to include student growth on either campus-specific mastery tests or statewide instruments such as the Basic Skills Examination and later the Regents' Reading Examination, it is hoped that they are broadened in scope to include the development of extensive depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge. Either way, setting goals for a vocabulary program leads to a clear rationale for the adoption of texts, the development of well-planned instructional methods and techniques, and the selection and design of appropriate assessment instruments.

Reference Note

1. Rubin, Dorothy. Gaining Word Power. New York: MacMillan, 1978. This text is now issued as two texts: 1.) Rubin, Dorothy, Vocabulary Expansion I, New York: Macmillan, 1983, and 2.) Rubin, Dorothy, Vocabulary Expansion II, New York: MacMillan, 1983.

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Table 1

Assessment Instruments Used for Measuring Vocabulary Achievement (n=49)

Type of Instrument	Community Colleges (n=16)		Comprehensive Colleges (n=17)		Universities (n=3)		Vocational/Technical Schools (n=13)	
	Regular Use	Diagnostic Use	Regular Use	Diagnostic Use	Regular Use	Diagnostic Use	Regular Use	Diagnostic Use
Standardized reading test-vocabulary section	81%	31%	88%	41%	—	—	62%	23%
Standardized vocabulary test	6%	—	18%	18%	—	—	15%	8%
Informal test from an instructional manual	37%	6%	35%	12%	33%	—	31%	8%
Informal test developed by teacher	44%	—	41%	—	—	66%	38%	—
Departmental test	19%	—	12%	6%	—	—	23%	8%

Table 2

Class Tests Used for Assessing Vocabulary Growth (n=48)

Community Colleges (n=16)	Comprehensive Colleges (n=16)	Universities (n=3)	Vocational/Technical Schools (n=13)
Chapter tests (56%)	Final tests (69%)	Chapter tests (33%)	Pretest-posttest (69%)
Section tests (56%)	Chapter tests (56%)	Section tests (33%)	Section tests (46%)
Final tests (56%)	Section tests (50%)	Final tests (33%)	Final tests (38%)
Pretest-posttest (31%)	Pretest-posttest (50%)	Pretest-posttest (——)	Chapter tests (23%)

Table 3

Item Formats for Teacher-Made Vocabulary Tests (n=48)

Community Colleges (n=16)		Comprehensive Colleges (n=16)		Universities (n=3)		Vocational/Technical Schools (n=13)	
Multiple choice	(81%)	Multiple choice	(75%)	Multiple choice	(67%)	Multiple choice	(77%)
Fill-in	(81%)	Write a definition	(69%)	Analogies	(67%)	Write a definition	(77%)
Use word in a sentence	(75%)	Synonym matching	(50%)	Write a definition	(67%)	Fill-in	(54%)
Synonym matching	(62%)	True-false statements	(50%)	Synonym matching	(33%)	Synonym matching	(46%)
True-false statements	(56%)	Fill-in	(50%)	True-false statements	(—)	Use word in a sentence	(46%)
Analogies	(50%)	Use word in a sentence	(50%)	Fill-in	(—)	Analogies	(8%)
Write a definition	(50%)	Analogies	(19%)	Use word in a sentence	(—)	True-false statements	(—)

Table 4

Instructional Methods for Vocabulary Development (n=48)

Instructional Method	Percentage Using Methods in Each Institutional Category				
	Community Colleges (n=16)	Comprehensive Colleges (n=16)	Universities (n=3)	Vocational/ Technical Schools (n=13)	Total (n=48)
Individualized work with varied materials	87%	81%	—	69%	69%
Assignments in a vocabulary text completed outside of class	75%	62%	33%	15%	58%
Audio-visual activities	15%	37%	33%	54%	44%
Independent work in a programmed text	44%	37%	33%	38%	40%
Student-developed vocabulary collection	19%	31%	—	31%	25%
Assignments in a vocabulary text completed in class	12%	12%	33%	46%	23%
Computer-assisted instruction	19%	25%	—	23%	21%
Peer-teaching	6%	6%	—	15%	8%

Table 5

The Most Commonly Employed Curriculum Elements of Vocabulary Development (n=49)

Community Colleges (n=16)	Comprehensive Colleges (n=17)	Universities (n=3)	Vocational/Technical Schools (n=13)
Words in Context (94%)	Word Elements (94%)	Word Elements (100%)	Words in Context (92%)
Dictionary/Reference Utilization (94%)	Words in Context (88%)	Etymology (67%)	Dictionary/Reference Utilization (92%)
Etymology (87%)	Figurative Language (88%)	Words in Context (67%)	Word Elements (77%)
Word Elements (81%)	Dictionary/Reference Utilization (71%)	Figurative Language (67%)	Pronunciation Skills (77%)
Figurative Language (75%)	Word Families (59%)	Dictionary/Reference Utilization (67%)	Word Families (46%)
Word Families (75%)		Pronounciation Skills (67%)	

Table 6

Instructor-Designed Activities for Building Vocabulary (n=49)

Community Colleges (n=16)		Comprehensive Colleges (n=17)		Universities (n=3)		Vocational/Technical Schools (n=13)	
Definitions	(87%)	Words in context	(94%)	Analogies	(67%)	Definitions	(77%)
Fill-ins	(81%)	Matching	(82%)	Multiple choice	(33%)	Multiple choice	(69%)
Multiple choice	(81%)	Multiple choice	(76%)	Words in context	(33%)	Words in context	(69%)
Words in context	(81%)	Definitions	(76%)	Definitions	(33%)	Sentence completion	(54%)
Analogies	(81%)	Sentence completion	(76%)	Word elements	(33%)	Matching	(46%)
						Fill-ins	(46%)

APPENDIX

SURVEY OF INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES: VOCABULARY SKILLS

Please help us to determine the nature of vocabulary instruction utilized by college reading and study skills specialists in this region of the nation by completing this questionnaire. It should take no longer than fifteen mintues to answer the items. While the questions or categories call for simple check-off type responses, we welcome any comments you might be willing to share.

I. Texts issued During the 1982-1983 Academic Year: Please list any vocabulary texts you assign to your classes.

A. Author: _____ Title: _____

Reason for selecting this text: _____

_____

B. Author: _____ Title: _____

Reason for selecting this text: _____

_____

C. Author: _____ Title: _____

Reason for selecting this text: _____

_____

II. Assessment Activities Used in Classes: (A) Please put a check next to each of the assessment instruments you regularly use for initial screening activities or for assessment vocabulary achievement levels. (B) Please put a "D" next to each instrument you use for diagnostic purposes.

_____ Vocabulary section of a standardized reading test (Please list the instrument) _____

_____

_____ Standardized vocabulary test (Please list the instrument)

_____

_____ Informal vocabulary instrument provided in an instructional manual

_____ Informal vocabulary instrument you developed for use with your pupils

_____ Vocabulary test developed by your department, school, etc. (Local norms may or may not have been developed)

_____ Other _____

III. Instructional Assessment: (A) Please put a check next to each type of test you regularly use to monitor vocabulary growth over a semester.

_____Chapter tests _____Section tests _____Pretest posttest

_____Final test _____Other (explain)_____

(B) Please put a check next to each of the types of test items you generally use on your class tests.

_____Synonym Matching _____True-False Statements

_____Multiple Choice Items _____Analogies _____Fill-in Items

_____Students use words in sentences

_____Students provide definitions or synonyms

_____Other (explain) _____

IV. Instructional Practices: Please put a check next to each of the following instructional practices you follow when teaching vocabulary skills.

_____Students undertake regular vocabulary assignments keyed to a vocabulary text. Assignments are generally completed in class.

_____Students undertake regular vocabulary assignments keyed to a vocabulary text. Assignments are completed outside of class and then reviewed in class.

_____Students undertake individualized work in a vocabulary text/ workbook, skills series, worksheets, etc. throughout the semester.

_____Students undertake independent work with a programmed text.

_____Students undertake computer-assisted instructional activities.

_____Students keep an individualized vocabulary collection (e.g., Frontier System).

_____Students undertake peer-teaching activities on a regular basis.

_____Students undertake audio-visual activities.

_____Other _____

_____

V. Instructional Categories: Please put a check next to each of the vocabulary categories you generally cover with your students.

_____Etymology/Historical Contexts _____Word Elements

_____Foreign Words _____Jargon _____Words derived from proper nouns _____Misused Words _____College Content Field

_____Words in Context _____Figurative Language _____Slang

_____Word Families _____Descriptive Words

_____Dictionary/Reference Utilization _____Pronounciation Skills

_____Other _____

VI. Practice Activities: Please check each of the practice activities you use with your students.

_____Acrostics _____Matching _____Fill-ins

_____Crossword Puzzles _____Word Element Fill-ins

_____Crisscross Puzzles _____Word Searches _____Multiple Choice

_____Words in Context _____Definitions _____Word Elements

_____Word Scramble _____Analogies _____Sentence Completion

_____Other _____

VII. Please check the type of institution at which you are currently teaching.

_____Research University (doctorate granting)

_____Comprehensive University or College (non-doctorate granting)

_____Liberal Arts College _____Community/Junior College

_____Technical College _____Other _____

VIII. What is your current level of appointment?

_____Professor _____Associate Professor _____Assistant Professor

_____Lecturer _____Teaching Assistant

_____Student Services Officer _____Counselor _____Learning Specialist_____OtherStaffPosition _____OtherAcademic Position

Please put a check next to each of the types of institutions where you have taught.

_____Elementary School _____Middle School _____High School

_____Community College _____Technical School

_____Liberal Arts College _____Comprehensive University/College

_____Research University (doctorate granting)

_____Adult Basic Education Program

Please put a second check next to the type of institution where you taught for the longest period of time.

X. Please provide your name and address if you would like a summary of the survey.

Name _____

Address _____

_____

_____

Return this survey to Norman A. Stahl, Division of Developmental Studies, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA 30303.